

**HOPE
FOR FAITH**

C.F. Beyers Naude
Dorothee Sölle

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HOPE
FOR FAITH
a conversation



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They are both committed Christians, active in the struggles of our day for peace and justice. They have taken a stand, in controversial areas of the life of the church and of society, and they have suffered for it.

They had never met, but they had followed each other's career from a distance. They met in the Netherlands, for the first time, on 20 June 1985. They were interviewed for IKON Television, the Dutch ecumenical broadcasting company, by Prof. Dr Lammert Leertouwer.

One of them, Rev. Dr Christiaan Frederik Beyers Naudé, is the general secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He has identified himself with the aspirations of the black people in his country, and has suffered alienation and rejection. A banning order for seven years had meant a severe curtailment of his freedom of movement.

The other, Prof. Dr Dorothee Sölle, is a German theologian, now teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Reacting to the Nazi phase of her national history and to her own background of affluence, she has involved herself in the peace movement and the cause of the poor of the world.

Reproduced here is the text, unedited for the most part, of their 90-minute conversation. In it we hear the stories of their conversion to Christ and of their involvement in the struggles of our time. We hear them talking about concerns which have increasingly claimed a place on the agenda of the ecumenical movement.

A dialogue of commitments which touches on some of the most talked-about issues of our day.

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Interviewer

Two very different people: Professor Dorothee Sölle, now teaching theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and Dr Beyers Naudé, general secretary of the South African Council of Churches. They have, however, something in common. For many people all over the world their very existence is a sign of hope, but for others, among them old friends and relatives, they are dangerous people, misguided in their hopes, confused in their way of life, even traitors to the best traditions of the Christian church: heretics, to say the least.

Dr Sölle, how well do you know this Rev. Beyers Naudé, and what makes it so important for you to meet him?

Sölle

I believe the significance of our meeting has to do with our Christian heritage and its future. Beyers, reading through some of what you did and lived through in the last years, I have wondered about your inner growth and development — but these are just ordinary words. What I really mean is much more spiritual. It is called conversion, it's turning round from one way to another one, and that is, I think, what interests me most about your life and the life of all my fellow Christians, and my own life as well: How does God work with us in our times and convert us from our wrong ways?

Interviewer

So let that be the first theme of this discussion. I would like to show you a picture, Dr Sölle. Do you recognize this typical Afrikaaner dominee* to the left, member of the Broederbond, firmly rooted in South African society? And are you able to understand that it is the same man you are talking to?

* Pastor



Sölle

Not easily!

Interviewer

Dr Naudé, what happened to the man in this photo?

Beyers Naudé

Well, I wouldn't blame Dorothee if she said: "I don't recognize the man and I don't recognize at all or understand what has happened to you." I perhaps should say that I come from a very conservative, deeply religious Afrikaaner home. My father was also a minister of religion, steeped in the Calvinist tradition, strong, very strong in his feelings of loyalty to his people, a patriot in the best sense of the word, as seen by the Afrikaaner people. He fought in the Anglo-Boer war, on the side of the Boers, had a deep friendship with one of the generals called Christaan Frederick Beyers — that is why my name is not a family name. I was named after General Beyers, who died shortly before I was born. So in that sense my whole background is one of a deeply religious, strongly nationalist Afrikaaner tradition.

I know that many people find it difficult to understand how it has been possible for somebody coming from that background, with my whole education, my position which I held in the Dutch Reformed Church (the NG Kerk), where I was elected moderator of one of the regional synods, with the fact that for 23 years I was a member of the secret Afrikaans organization called the Afrikaaner Broederbond — for somebody like that to become what I have become today. What happened to me?

I think there are three major factors which contributed to my conversion. The first is a theological one. When, after the Second World War, in looking at

what was happening in Africa, the whole process of decolonization, freedom — political freedom — coming to Africa, the cry of millions of Africans throughout the continent to throw off the yoke of colonialism, with my deep interest in mission, in evangelism, and in the youth work of the church, I asked myself: “What does this say to us in South Africa?”

Of course I knew the stand which my church had taken with regard to apartheid. And that led me to a self-study of the traditional ways in which the Dutch Reformed Church justified the whole policy of apartheid on biblical grounds. I did this study in between, and eventually came to the conclusion that there was no way in which I could justify on biblical grounds the whole policy of apartheid, as was done by my church. There was no way I could subscribe to the interpretation which they gave to certain passages of the Old and the New Testament. These were either unconsciously or deliberately so distorted, so one-sided, so politically or ideologically motivated and loaded, that for the first time, you know, there was this theological crisis in my life.

But I was afraid to make this known because I knew, with my position of leadership in the church, with my position in the Broederbond, that if I started to express these new convictions in public, it would lead to a tremendous storm, reaction, protest, anger and rejection.

Sölle

May I interrupt you and ask a question out of my own tradition? I am a German, living after Auschwitz, and when you just said how the tradition of your church has justified and legitimized apartheid theology, I recalled that in my country, the “Deutsche Christen”

justified National Socialism and tried to ground their racism and their Führer principle on some misinterpreted Christian tradition. Would that be a parallel for you?

Beyers Naudé

No doubt about it. At that stage of my study, I didn't know that. But in the course of my study I came to the shocking conclusion that there were many parallels, painful parallels, frightening parallels, between what had happened in the period of Nazi Germany, especially within the church, and what we were trying to do to justify a racist and unjust policy. At first I was unwilling to admit that — it was painful, too painful — but eventually I was forced to do so. I am not saying they are identical, but there are very strong parallels, and that led me to the discovery eventually that I could not any longer support it. But I kept it to myself. I was very afraid to express it in public.

And then I think of a second event in my life, or a series of events, which subsequently I saw to be, if I may describe it in this way, the hand of God guiding me into a new direction. It was the fact that I was elected as acting moderator of the Transvaal Synod, and in that position, young ministers — white ministers — who were serving African and coloured and Indian congregations came to me with the problems which they were experiencing within their own congregations, the painful experiences of their own people with what apartheid laws were doing to them. And when they came to me and described what they themselves had experienced, I could not believe it. I knew them well, because they were students when I was a university pastor in Victoria. There was a very fine, open, warm relationship between us and I said to them: "It's impossible, it can't be." And then they invited me to go

to their congregations, which I did. I met with their church councils, I met with members of the congregation, I met with families who were deeply divided because, for instance, of the mixed marriages act, and the group areas act, and I was shattered. It was an experience which led me to the situation of being totally lost.

And then came Sharpeville — that was the third event. On 21 March 1960, a peaceful protest march of people was disrupted by 69 people being shot, most of them in their back when they fled, and that in a certain sense culminated the whole situation. And there was no way in which I could get out of it any longer.

Sölle

And then to think that this spring they did it again!

Beyers Naudé

Subsequently I recognized it as the way in which God in a certain sense had guided me all along and said to me, “OK, I’ll give you the time to think about it, to reflect upon it”, but all of a sudden there was that crisis and there was no option, except to stand by what I then had discovered to be the truth.

Interviewer

You were speaking about crisis and fear, so can we ask you, Dr Sölle, what happened to that upper middle-class liberal German girl who has now become Dorothee Sölle? You must know fear and you must have known very deep dangers in your life.

Sölle

I think one root of my changing, and continuing to change, has to do with my national identity, being a German, and not denying that at any point, inheriting

this terrible heritage which I cannot wash off me. It's just a part of my life to be a German, to think in that language, to talk, and to know what was done to the Jewish people in the name of my country, "im Namen des Deutschen Volkes". I cannot help thinking of the people who were killed in the gas chambers and concentration camps. To think of them is a lifelong learning process, a kind of quest for truth. Why did that happen? Why did those nice people who played the violoncello and read Goethe do all these things, or at least tolerate them? What happened to them? What were the deepest reasons? It's not just one demon called Adolf Hitler — that's ridiculous. I ask not only my country but also my class — the bourgeois class: How come that this class so often pretended not to know, not to have anything to do with it? How is this related to our present stage?

And I would like to make a remark about apartheid, what that means to me. Three or four years ago I met two young white students from your country, Beyers, in the United States. We got to talk a little bit and I asked them about the situation in South Africa, and about the situation of black people, and specifically about whether they knew Soweto, whether they had been there, whether they knew if the people had water or not in their huts or barracks, if they had electricity or oil or not — very specific questions. And they didn't know a thing. They knew the golf and tennis places where they used to play. They knew their little schools, they knew how beautiful their country was. They gave me a story as if they were talking for a travel agent. They told me how beautiful that country is, and they did not respond to any of my more and more specific questions because they didn't know. They simply did not know the reality of their own country. There is an invisible wall which is much worse than the Berlin wall in my country, a wall that is most terrible.

Today: not knowing = guilt

I think most of the people of my country live behind that wall because apartheid is not just a South African problem. It's a problem of the rich world and the so-called first world that we live in apartheid, that we live behind that wall and we know about the nice cheap bananas and nice coffee we get from these poor countries and we know of a lot of things we can have and buy, and go to, but our perspective is still the perspective of a tourist and not the perspective of a sister or a brother.

Beyers Naudé

May I respond and make some remarks on that? You remind me of one of the most painful aspects of our life in South Africa; we do not know.

I constantly ask myself, how is it possible that a community, in this case a white community, deeply religious, claiming to be devoutly Christian, building its whole life — or claiming to build its life, and also its political structure — on the recognition of God's sovereignty as it is stated in our constitution; how is it possible that we could, for instance, remove forcibly three and a half million people from their land, from where they live, from where they had settled down, from where they are happy as a community, force them into arid, remote areas where the possibility of livelihood, of income, of existence is in fact so small that for all practical purposes it is a process of slow death which they are facing?

Sölle

It indeed is, and how do we answer that question?

Beyers Naudé

And, you know, I must feel the agony of this, especially because I know that the people who are in control and in power doing this, these are my people. I cannot deny

that I am an Afrikaner. I don't want to deny it. How can I? I am nothing else but an Afrikaner, and yet in that sense I don't see myself to be there — then the agony of that separation. What are the basic roots, what are the deepest roots of such an injustice, of such inhumanity? How do we continue to justify it, and that in the face of the fact that the whole world outside is turning like South Africa. This is wrong, this is inhuman, and this is evil. I am still struggling because I find certain answers but yet I sense here in myself this is not yet the full answer. There is some deeper perspective of human existence, of human justification of such acts which I have not yet been able to discover.

Sölle

Yes, I do believe that it is a theological problem, and not just political or social, as they always tell us.

Interviewer

Do you agree?

Beyers Naudé

I fully agree.

Sölle

It is a question of faith and not just a question of reason. It is our faith which is touched on in those questions. And I have this question — that's another thing I would like to ask you; when you were converted to fight apartheid and to go along with your black brothers and sisters and develop at the same time a sort of liberation theology which comes out of the struggle, why did other people in your church not go along with you, or why did they stay where they were, almost immobile, immovable?

This is also my question about my church, and my country, at the time of this great awakening, as I would like to call the peace movement since 1979 in my country, when millions and millions of people went on the street and wanted to fight that general apartheid we have in the world between the rich and the poor. Why do we need so many bombs and weapons of death, they asked. They understood quite well why they went on the streets. But there was a split in the church as well, and many young people went out on the streets, and many young pastors went, and many church synods and groups and hierarchies stayed aside or stayed in a wishy-washy, what we call a “ja-nein” position, saying “ja” and “nein” at the same time! But why is that so, why couldn’t we reach them, why couldn’t we move together, as one group? It’s one of my deepest wishes to see that coming true in my life-time.

Beyers Naudé

I think the first reason, from my side, is that in the Afrikaaner society there is such a deep sense of loyalty to a wrong concept. Loyalty to your people, loyalty to your country, loyalty and patriotism, have in a certain sense become deeply religious values; they have been converted into deeply religious values. So that anybody who is seen to be disloyal to his nation, to his people, is not only deemed to be a traitor, but in the deeper sense of the word, he is seen as betraying God. He is betraying the deepest values of the understanding of faith as it was portrayed. So again the basic problem is not an economic one or a cultural one or a social one, although all these factors play a role, in the deep sense of unity of the Afrikaaner people.

The fact is that you are allowed to have your differences among your Afrikaaner people, but only to a degree. You must know where the boundary is, the limits of dissent and of disagreement. The moment you

overstep that boundary — and that line is very finely drawn and invisible — the moment you overstep it you are totally out. You are ostracized, you are pushed aside, you are seen to be a traitor and, humanly speaking, you are never taken back. And I think in my case it was due to the fact that the Afrikaaner people see themselves to be a minority, feel themselves to be threatened, and their whole history has been built up on the basis of fear. There was the threat, you know, from the black majority, the threat from British imperialism, the threat coming from others. Hence their mentality of the besieged, that “lager” mentality, in which our people always felt that true patriotism and true loyalty meant you stand by your people regardless of questions of right and wrong.



Sölle

I couldn't agree more, in regard to my own country. There is a deeply grounded wrong understanding of God's intention with us, in the understanding of salvation as salvation of individuals who will be freed from this more or less bad world which never can be changed. It's not an understanding of the kingdom of God, it's about the salvation of the ego in a way, so individualism is really at the heart of this form of religion. I think there are some differences in terms of nationalism because in Western Europe, or at least in Germany, I do believe that nationalism died in 1945, more or less, when instead of that we got a new identity which was made up of belonging to the West, economically first of all, militarily, and politically in our political system. As soon as we move away from the Western culture and the Western ideals we are blamed; we are no good as Germans, no good as democrats or whatever. The most natural accusation they level against those who disagree or register dissent is, of course, as it is in your case, that we are all communists, paid by Moscow, as everyone knows! Whenever you disagree with this golden calf, and say: "No, that is not the God who led us out of Egypt, this is not our God", then they tell you you are a commie.

Beyers Naudé

That's right.

Sölle

You get this all the time, in soft or less soft forms.

Interviewer

Have you been ostracized as Dr Beyers Naudé said that he was?



Sölle

Yes, I could say so. I mean, I am not teaching in my own country, but in a more, theologically speaking, liberal country, which the United States in many ways still is.

Interviewer

You would like to be a professor of theology in Germany now?

Sölle

Years ago I had this idea, this intention, but it just didn't work out for several reasons. One was surely my being a woman. Then there were the political and theological questions. I'm not bitter about that; it's simply a fact of life. I think my theological development made a big step forward when I learned

things from my brothers and sisters in the third world. What I had looked for or tried to grasp was a sort of political theology, but they gave me this beautiful new term and concept, theology of liberation, and since then I have tried to do a theology of liberation for first world citizens in my own country. That means, of course, that you get ostracized; you get into trouble with family and friends, and many other people, and the media, etc., etc. They just make you into a non-person.

Beyers Naudé

That's right.

Interviewer

Do you recognize that?

Beyers Naudé

Yes, I do. And the moment they succeed in making you a non-person, whatever you say, therefore, loses significance and loses meaning, and therefore in that sense they invalidate what you are saying, and thereby, as it were, remove the danger that the ideas and the thoughts that you present could therefore have some impact. I think that was one intention of the banning order put on me, for seven years, you know. The Germans have got a beautiful word, a vivid description which says: they make you "mundtot". No word, no sign, no life. That's the only way in which they can deal with it.

But what really puzzles me, and perhaps you could help me here, is that you have got the freedom of speech, for instance in the German community, in society and the church. Look at all your publications, look at all your newspapers, your media — everybody is free to express his or her opinion. And I sense this, for instance when I think of the Kirchentag. I saw there

thousands of young people coming together, sincerely seeking after truth, meaningful life, the relationship of their Christian faith to their living and to the problems all over the world. I mean, in the mornings, you know, I saw six to seven thousand young people sitting there, in eight of the different halls, doing Bible study, and yet at the same time I hear the complaint all around Germany that the young people are no longer in the church. Well then, to me the question immediately arises: not what is wrong with the young people but what is wrong with the church?

Sölle

Sure, and as soon as the church wakes up from this apartheid theology, as I would call it — it's almost like in scholasticism when the theologians debated how many angels could stand on a needle's point. So is in a way dealing with theology in terms of the sixteenth century, removing theology from reality, from our problems today. How should we, where do we invest our money, for example? Do we invest it with Dresdnerbank which makes its profit from South African business life? Do we go ahead and buy South African Outspan oranges, or do we protest that and tell our people this tastes like blood?

These are the questions we try to bring into the church bodies. These are the things we discuss with people; we tell them that this is the way Christ is crucified today, and that you can't develop any piety outside all of this and independent of all of this, keeping yourself clean from reality. I do believe that there is a deep religious need, or a desire to learn more about religion, to hear, to understand what it is all about. There is a deep thirst. But this cannot be the answer, you can't give them coca-cola for that. And there is a sort of a churchy coca-cola around, and people are really beginning to understand that this doesn't help them.

Beyers Naudé

But the young people, they are too shrewd, they've got that inner sensitivity, they've got that basic honesty, in fact that brutal honesty, in which they will listen and they will consider, they will reflect, and they will eventually come to the conclusion that in no way what this person is saying reflects reality as I see it, what I believe to be the truth as I experience it. And that is my basic problem also with regard to what is happening in our country.

Interviewer

How about young people in your country?

Beyers Naudé

Well, could I just try to answer by saying that whenever anybody asks me a question about my country, I've always got to reply with a question first. Which part of the people are we talking about? The white sector or the black sector? Because the division is so deep that for all practical purposes the responses, the values, the valuation also, you know, are always basically different. As far as the young white people are concerned, the majority of the young white people in South Africa live to a large degree in ignorance of what is happening, or even if they are aware they are not concerned, they are not involved, it doesn't affect them so deeply, and even when it does, some of them are afraid that it does.

Interviewer

So they cannot be the young people you put so much of your hopes in?

Beyers Naudé

No, certainly not. If I have to put my hope in South Africa on the youth, it is first of all the black youth,

who are responding, who are sacrificing their lives, who are trying to give a message to South Africa and to the world in a way which is, to many, shocking, totally unacceptable, painful. They are saying: "Sorry, we don't understand your Christian life and Christian faith as you portray it. To us it has no relevance, no meaning. We want to see a concrete, living example of justice, of righteousness, of love, of truth, of liberation." The moment they see something of that in a minister or a priest, or a person who calls himself or herself a Christian, there is a response.

Now, if that's the case, then I ask myself, why is it that we also in South Africa, as the church, don't hear this, why is it that we are not more sensitive to it? And respond to it, instead of waiting until a situation of such conflict arises, where young people are forced to take up stones and to throw them, to make Molotov cocktails and to use them, and then to be condemned by a large sector of the Christian community, inside and outside the country, for doing what they are doing? Why do we do it, instead of asking ourselves, are we not the ones who are basically to be blamed, that we allowed a situation to develop where these young people were forced into such an action on their part?

Sölle

It comes to my mind that Gandhi, who was the apostle of non-violence, was once asked whether he would fight Hitler with non-violence as well, and he said "no", he could not, because against Hitler he had to use violence. And this was said by the hero of non-violence, and I think the ANC in a way says the same thing. They tried so hard — it's a terrible story, the history of the African fight for freedom in your country, how long they went along with non-violence

and how bloodily they were beaten down, just as the people of Gandhi were beaten down again and again, the harmless people who did nothing — like Sharpeville, and the worst thing about Sharpeville is that it continues. Just this year we had it again, the same story, as if nothing had happened.

Beyers Naudé

And it was on the very day, you know this is what makes it so terrible, on the very day, 25 years later, of the commemoration of Sharpeville: twenty people, marching peacefully to a funeral, are shot and killed. Then the question arises, do we never learn? And what is the response on the part of the Christian community?

Talking about the ANC, normally it is not known that the ANC was established in 1912, two years after the Union of South Africa was established; it was organized in protest against the establishment of the Union of South Africa, where the legitimate rights of the black community were deeply affected and, in fact, rejected. For 48 years the African National Congress stood as a totally peaceful political organization, trying to build the resistance on peaceful lines — Luthuli, you know, the well-known leader of the ANC, winner of the Nobel Prize, an advocate of non-violence up till the day of his death. And you know, what affected my life very deeply was this. For the first time I began to read the history of the ANC and, to my shame I must say, I had no knowledge even of the existence of the ANC up till 1960. It is terrible, but it is true!

And when for the first time I began to read this, my first question was, during these 48 years was there any church in South Africa which officially supported those goals and the striving for justice and for liberation on the part of the majority of the people? As far as I know there

was not a single resolution which was adopted by any church, or by any synod during those 48 years in favour of expressing themselves in moral support of that striving for justice. Individuals, yes, but not the church as a whole, and again that brought up for me the painful question, what is wrong in our own understanding and proclamation of the faith that we live in that kind of a cocoon which we spin around ourselves, happily warm, ensconced in it, and the world outside — don't worry, that's their problem!

Interviewer

Both of you seem to be very disappointed in the church, in your own church, in the church as such. Is there any future for this church?

Sölle

You know, I do believe we live in a time where this marriage between the church and the capitalist order is breaking. The divorce is not yet through, but it will come. Time works for the divorce of church and capitalism, and we have to work inside of this process and free the church from the stranglehold of believing in the values of capitalism, and not seeing God's work beyond that system. And I am not absolutely hopeless. I am sceptical about my own church in West Germany because of its very special structure as a Volkskirche, with all that money behind it. I think perhaps my church will come last; after all other churches are converted to Jesus Christ, then finally even the West German Church will be converted to Christ. When I look around, look to the East, to East Germany, and what they say in the church about peace, and to Holland, our two neighbours, they are far ahead of ours, my church. What our churches say is weak, unclear, shaky, gives no clear direction to the people. They are not able to

condemn what has to be condemned today. They are not able to say it is a sin to build nuclear weapons, not to speak of using them, etc. etc. In all of this, I am not so sceptical about God's work elsewhere, but I think it starts again as it did in the New Testament, with the poor, and not with the rich.

Beyers Naudé

If I could respond to that, I think it depends on what we mean by the church. If we mean by the church mainly the institution, the structure, the visible, traditional symbols, then I believe that the church, in that sense, will experience one crisis after another, until it comes to the recognition, understanding, that the church, in the real sense of the word, is where the people of God are, where life is being discovered again, the true meaning of love, of human community, of mutual concern for one another, of caring of people, of seeking true meaningful relationship, understanding between people, not only between Christians but between all people. Therefore, in that sense I am very hopeful about what is happening, not only in our country, but also in other countries, because there are new perspectives, of the Christian faith and of truth, which are being discovered and which are being, as it were, agonized about by so many small groups of people. Tremendously encouraging insights and examples are coming through. If I think of South Africa, what encourages me is the fact that sometimes the most meaningful revelation about a new understanding of the Christian faith and about the Christian church and about Christian community comes from the poorest, comes from those communities which are normally not seen to be the ones with authority or with power, or comes from those who normally never believe themselves to have any real message. But

when you begin to listen to what they are saying, it is absolutely marvellous, and then to discover how little I know and how much I need to be constantly converted, in my whole understanding, in my whole willingness, therefore, in true humility to sit at the feet of such people, and learn and hear. And in that sense I believe there is a tremendous future for the Christian community in the world.

Sölle

I agree...

Interviewer

Only if it converts itself to the true gospel?

Sölle

Yes, but who is the church? I think the growth of the true church today comes not from within but from the outside, from the peace groups, from the women's groups, from those groups who in certain fields of post-Christian culture live and think and understand more and more the meaning of the gospel, rather than those who claim to be the masters of the gospel, namely those white male, middle-class theologians. These groups appropriate the gospel precisely the way you described it, in sharing in understanding our lives together in the light of the gospel. I don't put my hope so much on the youth as such, I think that's a sort of a myth, but I do put my hope much more on women, on women's groups inside the first world. Women who are so frustrated with that culture in which we live, that apartheid, this cultural apartheid, the brutality, the competitiveness, and all those factors of our life, that they have to distance themselves from — just to stay human or become human.

I think that there is a growth of faith in new forms all over the world, and some of the signs of it are very classical signs, it's base communities — and you may speak to that more than I can — it is martyrdom, which is one of the classical signs of where does the church live and grow. We in the first world, in relative freedom, don't experience martyrdom in the strict sense of the word. But I think we have to prepare ourselves and others in our midst for more restrictions, discrimination. The price to be a Christian will be higher in the next twenty years, will become higher and higher; it will be much tougher, if you really want to be a Christian.

Interviewer

And will the rewards also be higher, do you think? In Holland we have a commercial attitude. We want to know what we invest in!

Sölle

Yes, I think Christ didn't promise us victory. I think that would be an illusion. Christ promised us life, and that includes death. Christ didn't tell us that we would win. Other people tell us that all the time, but I think it would be too superficial to think that way. We hope to win; we fight to win; we give our blood and our lives to win and free ourselves in others, but I think we cannot understand our own struggle in terms of success and non-success.

Interviewer

You are seventy years old now, Dr Naudé, you should know.

Beyers Naudé

Could I perhaps add to that by saying that one of the most wonderful discoveries which I have made in this

pilgrimage of my life is that there comes a moment when you don't look for a reward any longer, you don't feel it is important at all. What is of importance to you is your experience of life, of an inner peace, of a strength of faith, of a continuation of your commitment, however weak it may be, and of the fact that you simply forget, you simply do not regard the traditional value systems which have been built up in you and around you to be meaningful any longer. Money? Well, you certainly need money to live, but money, in the sense of the word that it becomes a symbol therefore of security and value? Popularity, world acclaim? That was perhaps one of the most meaningful experiences of my life in this pilgrimage which I go through. Take, for instance, the fact that so many of the traditional values which were portrayed to me unconsciously — I don't think it was done deliberately by my father or my mother because they were deeply devout people, and I respect them for the fact that they gave us the very best according to their understanding. But I had to discover that so many of these values simply lost their meaning for me, and therefore an inner peace of mind came, also a loss of fear, that even if somebody asked me I'd say, well, suppose you go back, suppose now that you are being threatened, suppose that you may lose your life tomorrow, then, well, my response is, well if that happens, so what? Isn't then the death which you experience as a result of what you try to be in the deepest sense of the word, isn't that then something in a certain sense of a crowning of your whole life and what you try to convey?

People many times ask me, but don't you get tired? You know you have been fighting now for how many years? Since 1960, it's now 25 years. My wife many times has asked me, Beyers, constantly you are

repeating the same concern, you are stating the same conviction. Don't you get tired? And then my response is, yes certainly, at times I get tired, physically tired, but if you ask me whether in my mind or in my being, in my inmost being I get tired, I'd say no, because there is an inner deep conviction of the tremendous power of truth and of love, of the human community and of the willingness to learn, and learn especially from the most insignificant person. And where the wisdom of that comes out, there constantly I stand astounded to say, how foolish have you been, Beyers, that you did not see this and discover this before, and then I feel so tremendously enriched that I feel, okay, let the next day come. I am ready.

Interviewer

Can I ask you, Dr Sölle, are you often tired?

Sölle

Sure I am tired, I'm tired of saying the same thing, doing the same thing again and again. But in an inner sense, I'm not at all tired, I can't become tired with the gospel, that's a sort of self-contradiction. If the gospel is the gospel it nourishes me, and strengthens me, and I do believe that my greatest strength comes from the poor. Liberation theology has a principle, the poor are the teachers, so the teaching does not happen in Rome or Wittenberg or Amsterdam. It happens somewhere else. And today it happens where the poor are, and listening to the poor gives you an enormous strength. I was reading through the book of your country fellow-sister, Winnie Mandela, a marvellous book, where she talks about all this discrimination and hassle, from day to day, with the most cruel laws and law-like regulations of daily life for anyone there. And yet in that book I don't find even the slightest bit of

despair, frustration, tiredness, all of these moods we all have, or powerlessness. Instead of that I find in that book, in every line, strength, clarity, power, and a deep sense that truth will make us free. They have a different relation to truth than we do.

Beyers Naudé

Very true.

Sölle

I was moved when I saw that you were working on a paper with the name *Pro Veritate* (For Truth) and I think we need that more than anything else, in a world where children are growing up, watching six to eight hours' television which tells them about cat food or the new style of hairdressing or whatever — the most ridiculous things in which people are brain-washed through the unconscious messages of our culture, which are so devastating. I think that we need nothing more than truth, and in this sense I do believe that the greatest role of the church today is to be *mater et magistra*, to be a teacher. The church has to teach.

Interviewer

A mother as well as a teacher?

Sölle

A mother as well as a teacher, yes.

Beyers Naudé

I can only speak from the experience of our own country and of our own community, that this is something else which I discovered, that truth normally only is revealed to us in situations of crisis, where you are forced into the crucible, where you have to

make a choice, where you've got to get clarity in your own mind, as to where does justice lie, where does liberation lie, where it is no longer possible to say: I remain neutral. There is no neutrality possible, or no true neutrality, in a situation of crisis, and I think one of the major problems of the church is that it was in a certain sense educated to see itself to be a neutral body. We have also misunderstood the concept of reconciliation so that the church, or many parts of the church leadership, believe that you can only truly be a reconciling agent if you remain neutral, and that's not possible.

Sölle

No, that's not possible.

Beyers Naudé

You must first of all take your stand on the side of truth.

And then you can become a truly reconciling factor, because then you help your opponent to discover the fact of him or her not understanding the truth, and the moment both these parties come to discover where truth lies, also the truth of God's love, the truth of true commitment and community, the truth of people living together without fear, the moment that is discovered, then your true reconciliation becomes a motivating and a renewing force.

Sölle

I'd like to give an example of that. On 8 May, the day of capitulation, or of liberation, I was in Berlin speaking to a crowd, together with the Rev. Jesse Jackson from the United States. And he gave a very moving speech against such neutrality, and he made it very clear to us when he said, who talks against the Third Reich has to talk against the Fourth Reich as well, and with the Fourth Reich he meant South Africa. It was a speech of power and clarity,

encouraging the people to fight against these forms of injustice, and learn anew what love and justice is.

Beyers Naudé

May I just say that I think in this respect what is happening in our country is, in a certain sense, a real acid test which the whole church in South Africa is undergoing. My feeling is that we are being tested there as never before. And I'm not only talking again about the three white Dutch Reformed Churches still supporting apartheid, I'm talking about the churches claiming to reject apartheid, claiming to seek a new community, but yet in so many respects, you know, not still being prepared to pay the price. And I think in this respect what is happening there in South Africa could possibly be to a certain degree a guidance, or



hopefully an inspiration, to other parts of the world.

Because if we are able to discover again the true meaning of what it means to be the church, to be Christian, to live in true communion and in fellowship and understanding and love and forgiveness, to build a society which is more just, to discover also the true roots of peace, it may be that in the crucible of that society, which in a certain sense is a microcosm of the whole world, of people of different cultures and languages and faiths and religions and classes being together, we may be able to set an example and mediate hope. Even if it's only a small part of the community, black and brown and white, if I may be allowed to use these racial terms, which I don't like but I have to because of our situation.

Interviewer

We are all coloured...!

Beyers Naudé

Yes, fortunately. If we are able, even a little, to discover it and begin to live it out, to enact it more meaningfully, I just hope and pray that out of that some message of encouragement and of enlightenment and of hope will come to other communities.

Sölle

Yes, and to the power elites of the first world as well. I do believe that God works through the poor and with the poor, and they are those who bring liberation forward. But they, in our historical situation, need the cooperation of Christians among these minorities. They need the support of the minorities inside, right inside of the belly of the beast. Those of my brothers and sisters, for example, in the United States, who go to the borderline of Nicaragua and tell the invading Contras and their money-givers: "Please kill us first

before you go and kill all the Nicaraguans. We are American citizens. Here's our passport." That is a wonderful witness for peace, in my eyes, and I think there are more of these than we usually know.

Beyers Naudé

And it is the same in South Africa. There are two major treason trials, which are at the present moment being forced upon the community, the one starting on 11 July, the other one later in the year: 16 people in the one case, major leaders of the society of South Africa, struggling for justice and for peace; 22 others, amongst them you have some of the most deeply committed Christians that I have ever met in my life. And I ask myself, where is this leading us to? What is going to be the response on the part of the Christian community both inside and outside South Africa? I am not saying that there could not possibly be a proof which could be forthcoming in these trials that one or more of them may have considered contemplating or supporting an act of violence.

But even if that is the case, my question is, to what degree are we in South Africa trying to listen and to understand and to discover the real message that these people are trying to convey, both to South Africa and to the world outside? Even if all of them are going to be convicted, even if all the 38 are going to be sent to prison, for prison sentences ranging from possibly 5 years to 15 or 20 years, I am convinced that the indomitable spirit of those people will not one whit be dampened or in any way subdued. They will come out of that period of imprisonment with a deeper conviction, with an inner strength, and with no hatred.

That is something which the black community in South Africa taught me. Young people going in, being tortured, being mishandled, and coming out, and I ask

them, but don't you hate us whites for what you have experienced in pain and suffering? And then the answer comes, in the beginning I feared, and then I hated, and then I discovered, no, I am the one who is strong, because I have to pity this person. He is a victim, he is imprisoned in his own tragic concept, and therefore he is unfree and I am free. And, you know, once you hear that from a person who has been severely tortured, and you catch something of the tremendous warmth of that spirit of love and of community and of forgiveness, then you begin to understand that there is a totally new perspective to the Christian faith which these people in certain situations of crisis convey to you.

Interviewer

And that is why the poor are the teachers?

Sölle

Yes, that is why no one could teach us that except those who have gone through all of this, and really can tell us something about what it means to love our enemies. I mean, to love one's enemies may be the hardest thing in Christianity, in Christian faith. When I was young, coming out of a bourgeois education, I always thought: I don't have any enemies. What a strange concept! I really believed I didn't have enemies, and this was my solution to the problem of having enemies. I have no enemies. That was very typical for a young girl coming out of that culture, and it took me quite a while to understand that this is not what Jesus meant. He didn't give us this little bourgeois illusion. There are enemies, there are enemies of the human race today, who plan several terrible things for the human race. It's ridiculous to close one's eyes. To love the enemy doesn't mean to have illusions in a sort of nice, optimistic way, but it means to trust

even that enemy who is imprisoned in his tanks and atomic weapons and star wars concept, and so on and so on, that even there is that love of God hidden in this person, that person can be freed, can be liberated. I think it is a much deeper faith not to deny the reality of hostility and hate which are indeed realities, but to overcome them and to think about how people can change.

Beyers Naudé

But I would like to ask this question, Dorothee. Do you see the possibility that out of all this tension, and the agony, and the conflict, and the animosity, and the fear of so many communities around the world, do you see the possibility that out of this, let me call it, a



confessing community, a confessing movement, could emerge? Do you think such a community could be born, where people — well, first of all those who proclaim Christ and confess Christ — that on the basis of their experience and their understanding, they either intuitively or perhaps consciously begin to live and discover a deeper sense of living, of loving, of sharing, of understanding, of forgiving, of being willing also to stand up for their convictions, and if necessary suffer and die? And out of that, perhaps throughout the whole world, could such a confessing movement come forward?

I am wondering, for instance, of what happened with regard to the peace efforts here and in West Germany and in other countries. Where did these come from? I mean, all of a sudden there are thousands, in fact there are millions of people. Something had happened to them inside, and they were drawn together by a deep conviction. Now, my question is, is it impossible to hope and to expect that something similar could happen, with regard not only to the whole issue of peace, but also of justice, of the removal of fear? Is it impossible for people to come to the point of saying, well, our value systems, economic and social and cultural, these have been so distorted in many respects that we feel this is not the way in which God intended life on earth to be? That was the message which I felt very strongly at the Kirchentag, you know, in the key theme "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof", and there was a totally new vision which I believe some of the young people not only received, but which they brought home to us in their understanding of what this means. And naturally their interpretation is vastly different from the theological interpretation which you will get if you walk into the study of theologians and you pull out one theological dissertation after the other — vastly

different, but isn't it more meaningful, isn't it more existential, isn't it closer to reality?

Sölle

Yes, I couldn't agree more. Any true theological sentence includes a condemnation, or a negative side, so "the earth is the Lord's" means the earth is not General Motors, not the United Food Companies, or whoever you could mention of those who own the earth, and you have to name the owners of the earth. It is not the Pentagon's, even if they take most of our woods and places to relax and make them into their country, taking our soil from us. But I think, when you asked me, wouldn't it be possible, I really would say, you see as I do the signs of the times, and it happens already before our eyes that the blind begin to see. In my country, the peace movement grows slowly but step by step, deep into the conservative sector of society. The blind begin to see. It shows that people understand what the real issue is, how peace and justice are inter-related, and that you cannot build peace upon militarism, but have to build it upon justice. There is no other way to build peace. And this happens, I think, in many many places all over the world. Helder Camara has called them Abrahamic minorities and this is the *Gestalt* of it right now, but I think it grows and becomes more visible, and also the coalitions with other people coming from different traditions, maybe not the Christian faith but other humanistic or religious traditions.

I have a strong sense that the respect for us Christians working in the movement has grown so much in the last few years. Not for the church as such, but for those who tried to live out these new forms of community and risk and search for truth, and struggle for justice and peace.

Interviewer

Will there be a new Confessing Church?

Sölle

I think, in a way, what we have in liberation theology, which is not just a new theology but a new movement out of which a new form of theology comes, we do already have a change in the structural church or the dominant church. This happens through a certain polarization which takes place, it is said often, because we lose friends and brothers and sisters, but I think it happens and it grows. I think some of the World Council of Churches' proclamations already have the quality of such confession. If you say truly it is a sin against the Creator, the Redeemer and the Spirit to build and test nuclear weapons, that is a very very clear statement of faith, and not just a statement of reason.

And if you say you cannot feed the poor with bombs, you need something else for them, it is a similar statement which is very clear. And I think that happens more and more. I am thinking about the community of scientists and engineers, which is an important group of people, who need that conversion out of their purposeless and meaningless doing of research for I don't know what. But it is blind, it is highly irrational. I think that changes already, if you recall the MIT Conference in 1979, where they all confessed that they did not know where to go from here, a very interesting sign of the times, and I think that we are moving into that direction of a confessing church which is a church of resistance. That is the first thing to do. Maybe the Confessing Church even was not clear enough, the historical form of the Confessing Church in Germany, about what resistance really meant. Most people when they hear about the confessing church think about

Bonhoeffer. That is OK. If they think about all the rest of them it is not OK.

Interviewer

At least half of our clergy in prison, to be harassed by governments ... no money from the government any more, that kind of thing?

Sölle

It means very real things about prison, as a decent place for a person who lives in a state of injustice, as Thoreau said.

Interviewer

Have you ever been imprisoned, as Beyers Naudé has been banned for seven years?

Sölle

No, I haven't. I went to several things, and I am proud of being a member of my faculty at the Union Theological Seminary where 18 of my colleagues have recently been for brief periods imprisoned on behalf of South Africa.

Beyers Naudé

I am aware of that.

Sölle

For me it is a beautiful sign because some of those colleagues, to speak frankly, are very reluctant to do such things and go on the streets, they'd rather sit in the library and write footnotes. But the Spirit now is so strong, that she carries those people with them. They just cannot stand by and stay neutral. It is impossible in certain situations, and people understand that and do it.

Interviewer

I think this was the first time you had the opportunity to ask each other very difficult questions. Now, let us suppose that this is also the last time you see each other. It could be true, I hope not, but it could be true. What would be the most urgent question you would like to put?

Beyers Naudé

You mean the question that we would like to put to each other? You start, Dorothee.

Sölle

Why don't you start?

Beyers Naudé

Well, the question that I would like to put to you would be this: Do you, in yourself, have the strength to endure whatever may come to you by way of disappointment, by way of rejection, by way of non-recognition, by way of waiting, perhaps your whole life, without being able to participate in the victory of the truth that you are standing for? Do you believe that you will be able to sustain yourself through these years up to the very end?

Sölle

I am thinking of a friend's answer to that when I was in a state of despair, and had this sense of meaninglessness and never reaching anything, and then he talked about the cathedrals which were built during the Middle Ages. Most of them were built over 200 years, some over 300 years even, and some of the workers in those cathedrals never saw the whole building, they never went to pray there, they never saw the glass and all the beautiful things they gave their life for. And then this friend said to me: "Listen, Dorothee, we who are building the

cathedral of peace, maybe we won't see it either. We will die before it is completed, and yet we are going to build it. We are going on even if we won't live in that building." I think that is true and in a way it fits with what I wanted to ask you. It is not a real television response but when you asked that, I just thought of asking you: "Give me your blessing my brother, I need it."

Beyers Naudé (taking her hands in his)

May I? Loving Father, this is a moment of deep and meaningful togetherness. I thank you that I know your blessing is upon both of us, and upon all of us who wish to seek truth and love and peace for the whole world. Give this to us. Help us to receive it and never to lose it. Amen.



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